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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN WOMEN ACTIVISTS AT ODDS OVER NATIONAL STRATEGY

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm for reasons 1.5 (b) (d)

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) Infighting among Jordanian women's groups has hindered development of a coordinated national strategy for advancing women's rights in Jordan. Several leading women's groups boycotted a recent conference to discuss women's role in political development, saying that the organizing group -- which happens to be headed by the GOJ spokesperson -- did not sufficiently consult with them prior to scheduling the event. Several groups aired their gripes during a meeting on March 21 with the Prime Minister, who agreed to chair a national conference in May in the hopes of gaining consensus. The fray underscores the competitiveness inherent to the personality-driven women's and NGO movements in Jordan. Unfortunately, the sniping is hindering their collective ability to move their agenda forward. End Summary.

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DISPUTE EMERGES OVER WOMEN'S "NATIONAL STRATEGY"  
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2. (U) Based on meetings with women's groups in recent months seeking input for the GOJ's political and social reform agenda, Prime Minister Faisal al-Fayez charged them with developing a coordinated plan for advancing women's rights in Jordan. The Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW), headed by King Abdullah's aunt, Princess Basma, first formulated a women's national strategy in 1993, and is in the process of updating it. According to JNCW official Ibtisam Atiyat, the strategy has five pillars: legislation, human security, social protection, economic empowerment and participation in public life, the media, and communication.

3. (U) However, differences among women's groups emerged after the Jordan chapter of "Sisterhood Is Global Institute" (SIGI) (headed by Minister of State and GOJ spokesperson Asma Khader) drafted its own "national strategy" and scheduled a conference on March 24 to discuss political development in Jordan. Complaining publicly that they were not sufficiently consulted about the document or the conference preparations, six major women's groups, including the JNCW, rejected the document and boycotted the meeting. Amneh Zoubi, President of the Jordanian Women's Union (JWU) -- one of the oldest and most active women's NGOs in Jordan -- said that SIGI should not have taken the lead on such an important project because the group represents only a tiny portion of Jordanian women. She claims SIGI only invited women's groups to attend the opening ceremony of the meeting, and criticized SIGI's document saying women's organizations were not sufficiently consulted about the language and priorities.

4. (C) JNCW Secretary General Amal Sabbagh told poloff that a draft she saw included issues outside the realm of women's empowerment, such as a demand to abolish the State Security court. She added: "As a woman, there are more important and pressing issues we need to focus on," including legislation advancing women's legal rights, economic empowerment, and enhancing women's political voice and social status. She claims SIGI prepared at least four versions of the document and "no one knows which is the final one."

5. (U) For their part, SIGI officials say they consulted with other organizations about the document, which it initially drafted in January 2003 and presented to Parliament in June. Executive Director Lina Qoura said in a press interview: "Several organizations and specialists participated in drafting the document. But others refused to share their thoughts and ideas for various reasons." She added that SIGI approached several NGOs asking them to prepare papers for the conference, "but the majority of them apologized, saying they were busy and did not have time to prepare the document." She stressed that the document was not one of the major themes in the conference and that it was going to be presented as one of the participant's working papers. Disputing Zoubi's claims, Khader told reporters that invitations were sent to all women's organizations for the conference and those "who answered the call took part in the committee that drafted the document."

16. (U) The dispute prompted the boycotting groups to submit a memo complaining about SIGI's initiatives to the Prime Minister, who met with them on March 21 to discuss their concerns. Emphasizing the need to coordinate, al-Fayez responded to the discord by agreeing to chair another women's conference in May, this time hosted by the JNCW, focusing on political development. Sabbagh says that the JNCW's conference will include a wide spectrum of women's and civil society groups to ensure that all views are adequately represented.

17. (U) Senator May Abu Samen, head of one of the boycotting organizations, the Jordanian National Federation of Women (JNFW), said the meeting was positive and "the Prime Minister was very supportive and understanding of all the points of view that were put forward for discussion." However, she said he "stressed the need to cooperate and coordinate our efforts in order to realize King Abdullah's vision of empowering the status of women in Jordan." Nancy Bakir, human rights adviser to the Prime Minister, said in a press interview: "I feel with the women in Jordan, when they see that all their hard work and efforts over the many years are being... monopolized by just one private institution." She suggested the boycott of the conference was within the groups' rights to freely express themselves and in line with the democratic process evolving in Jordan.

18. (C) However, Sabbagh singled out Khader for particular criticism, saying privately that during the women's meeting with the Prime Minister, it was clear that Khader was speaking in her capacity as SIGI head, not as Minister of State. She said that Khader, as an attorney and human rights and women's activist, over the years has worked hard to advance women's rights in Jordan. However, Sabbagh criticized her domineering tactics, suggesting Khader is abusing her government position to advance her personal interests, and that of her organization.

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) The personality clashes and competitiveness among women's groups in Jordan overshadow much good work that is being done by individuals and organizations to empower women economically, politically, and socially. Poor communication also hinders their ability to work together effectively, pool resources, identify needs and gaps in assistance, and avoid overlaps in programs. Personality differences, and Asma Khader's forceful style, probably were contributing factors in this particular disagreement. Ironically, many activists tell us that it was Khader, through her ministerial position, who paved the way for the PM's outreach to women's groups. Ultimately, the lack of cohesion hurts women's efforts to advance their agenda with the GOJ and the public, as well as their ability to attract additional resources in the midst of competing priorities. It also presents a potential challenge to U.S. efforts to support women's empowerment programs in Jordan.

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